

THE BID TO SAVE THE GRANVILLE RAMSGATE

By Jan Dunn

Unlisted, 1914,

Cinema designed by Rowlett & Taylor of Broadstairs 1997



The Granville Pavilion c1920

The building began its life as the newly-created Granville Concert Enclosure with a partial roof and windbreaks in 1914, upgraded with a new canvas awning in 1920. The building's primary purpose was in offering a summer season Concert Party. This was a music-hall mix of musicians, singers and comedy acts. The opening show took place Saturday 30 May 1914 according to the *East Kent Times* newspaper, by welcoming Mr LJ Roxburghe Reely's Concert Party, 'The Comedies', appearing in the new concert enclosure every afternoon and evening during Whitsuntide. The show included the artists Miss Doris Dainton, Miss Gladys Mitchell, Miss Rita Harvey, Miss Edith Payne, Mr Leslie Gordon, Mr Stanley Greenward and Mr Roxburghe Reely himself. Tickets were priced at 2d, 4d and 6d.

In 1924 The Granville Concert Enclosure was given a brand-new roof offering "now complete shelter from the wind and rain" and a new name as The Granville Concert Pavilion. During the second world war and considering where it is situated directly above Ramsgate's Main Sands, it suffered terrible bomb damage and was rebuilt in 1947 by recycling as many bricks as possible that could be saved from the pavilion due to the shortage of bricks at the end of the war. It was given another new name of the Granville Theatre at its reopening in June 1947. In the early 1950s a Compton Melotone organ was installed and Gardenia Wells and her sister Veronica, who still live in the town, remember listening to the popular organist who used to play it but it was removed in the later 1970s. Joyce Dudely, who also still lives in the town today, remembers ice skating with her girlfriends at the Granville Theatre in the 1960s. Films were first screened from May 1986 on Sundays only, initially using 16mm projection equipment with 35mm later installed, becoming a full-time cinema from 1991. In 1997 two cinema screens were approved and the Granville Cinema was redesigned by Rowlett & Taylor of Broadstairs, retaining one screen for dual theatre/film screenings.

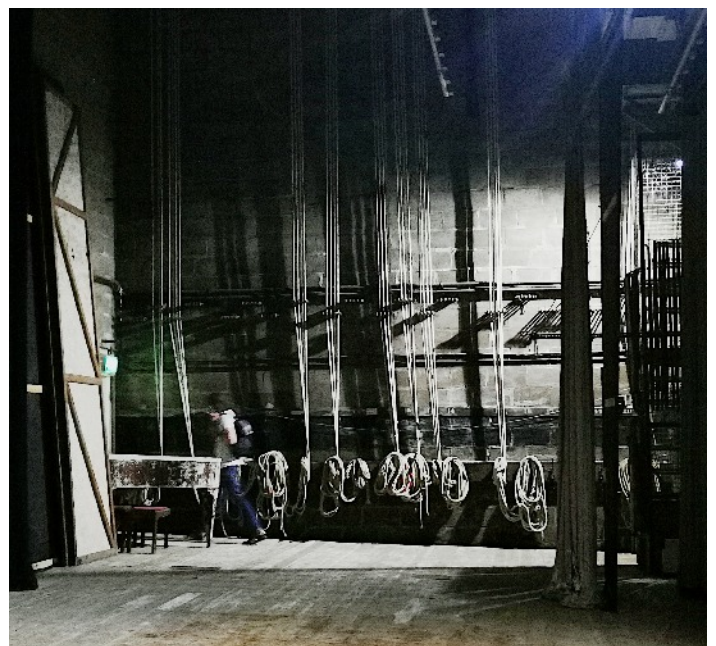


The theatre auditorium, showing the safety curtain



The state of the loos and a grand piano backstage

The Granville Cinema is Ramsgate's last remaining cinema of the three that used to be in the town including the Odeon and the King's cinemas and the only theatre. The Granville Theatre auditorium closed 2019 due to health and safety concerns, followed by the second cinema screen in March 2021 due to Covid. It has never reopened and is falling into further disrepair including a continually leaking roof and with constant plumbing issues. The building is owned by Thanet District Council which, along with the previous two tenants over two decades, have allowed the building to deteriorate. Ramsgate based charity Kent Film Foundation, which was founded by filmmakers and whose patron is the BAFTA winning actress Brenda Blethyn, are currently attempting to save the building and have been pursuing acquiring it in order to do so since 2017. As an established charity with an excellent track record in its community work using film, the foundation is in a good position to raise funding to undertake a considerable rebuild, transforming the building into the town's first and much needed Arts Centre, retaining the theatre and including three cinema screens and a café opening up onto the roof. Obviously as with all community arts groups they do not have unrestricted hard cash to offer upfront but an incredible highly-skilled team with a proven track record that can raise funds once they own the building either as freehold or long lease. Sustainability shall be at the heart of the project and undertaken as a Green Build. Their bid to acquire the building as a Community Asset Transfer was rejected by the council in February 2022. Not only were they the only community group to submit an application but they also bring with them other arts community groups and creatives. This has caused public outrage, especially given that they had no competitors by the deadline of applications for the CAT.



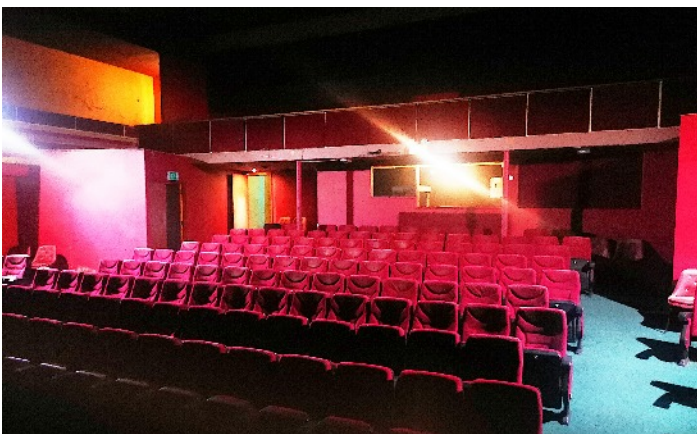
Backstage rope rigging



The Granville in 2022

The foundation originally registered interest to Thanet District Council in becoming next tenants of the cinema in April 2017. The organisation was aware that the tenant who occupied it at the time was not going to renew their agreement with the Council due to the likely costs of maintenance with neither party willing to spend the considerable amount needed to undertake the comprehensive refurbishment. In 2019 the foundation managed to get the building approved as 'An Asset of Community Value' (ACV) in the hope and with the aim of eventually acquiring the building via a Community Asset Transfer. The foundation brings with it a number of other locally based community arts groups that shall also benefit from the building and include Ramsgate Arts, Ramsgate International Film & TV Festival, Ramsgate Festival of Sound, Freedom Road, Ramsgate Music Hall and a film distribution company. Their team of Trustees include members with decades of experience in running cinemas and their plans to rebuild include support from the Theatres Trust and The Cinema Collective. Their advisors also include award-winning cinema owners and those who are operational officers of major and respected venues in the UK. The local community and creatives are utterly shocked at the decision made by the council since its cabinet approved for the building to be put on the disposal list for Community Asset Transfer consideration at a council meeting on 29 July 2021. The reason for the rejection has been given as a score sheet result around a criteria scoring that no applicant had access to during the application process, nor the headings it related to. Instead, Kent Film Foundation designed their bid and business plan around the Ramsgate Town Plan and the list of things to include that were highlighted in the brief application form. Their plans also showed the strength of their team and the excellent track record they have in the community work they have been doing for youth and in relation to the excellent audience numbers they attracted to the event screenings they ran on occasions at the theatre with the high level of speakers they can access.

After their application for the acquisition of the building was rejected, the public rallied around in support of Kent Film Foundation's aims by setting up a petition through [change.org](https://www.change.org), which has garnered over 5,500 signatories so far, not bad for a town of 40,000. Residents also organised a public 'wraparound' of the building but on an afternoon midweek only a few hundred were expected to turn up. However, 1,500 people turned up to support the proposals and plans that Kent Film Foundation have for the building, which include a £3-5m Green Build creating the new Arts Centre. Their plans include considerable economic regeneration, creates jobs and Kent Film Foundation's strong track record, as with the partner organisations involved shows excellent skills in building new audiences and their team has high level grant and public fundraising experience.



The theatre auditorium, looking to the rear

After Thanet District Council rejected the only Community Asset Transfer bid for the building that came from Kent Film Foundation, they have now put the cinema on the open market for a six-week period. Due to public pressure the deputy leader of Thanet District Council, Cllr Reece Pugh has confirmed that the building will not go to the highest cash bid but what the bidder will bring to the community of Ramsgate shall also be taken into consideration. Cllr Pugh is also the Council's cabinet member for economic development; his profile on the local conservative's website tells us he is keen to "promote economic regeneration for the local area paired with a strong entrepreneurial spirit within the community" and that he believes the "voices of the local people must always be heard". They have invited Kent Film Foundation to resubmit through the Right to Bid process but a spokesperson for Kent Film Foundation has pointed out, "This is very confusing as we understood that the RTB process had to be undertaken during the same moratorium period as the CAT where we were the sole applicants but the whole process has been very confusing to say the least. If this is really what they are looking for, there is absolutely no reason why they cannot turnaround the decision they made regarding bids from the community for a Community Asset Transfer to be passed over to the foundation, especially given that both our application and business plan confirmed that we were happy to negotiate the bid. We have always been concerned that the person (officer) who made the decision to reject our application outright without even meeting with us first has no understanding of the difference in business models between a cinema exhibitor, distributor or production company, let alone the right skills needed to run an arts venue. Our team and the skills our trustees have to raise large funding and to hire the right people appear to have not been understood at all or at the very least completely disregarded. We were also told by the estate's team prior to the deadline that if any further documents or details were needed that they would follow this up prior to the decision. These unique skills and the foundation's track record was outlined in the business plan but was unrelated to the questions within the simple application. It would appear that the only decisions regarding a score sheet criteria we were unaware of, related to areas that made our application ill-informed."

Brenda Blethyn (Patron of Kent Film Foundation) writes:

As a child it was always a treat to go to the Granville Ramsgate. And as an adult too. But half a century has taken its toll on the building. I firmly believe that the Kent Film Foundation have the right skills, knowledge and enthusiasm to bring the Granville back to the community in a modern way. They have the required expertise and professional contacts to bring this to fruition. And it would be so lovely to have the cinema open once again and for the theatre to be flourishing as a proper venue to invite professional companies to. I do so hope TDC will reconsider their application to save this building and for residents to be proud of it again.



The proposed Sandcastle Arts Centre